Chapter 35 To the Inner Court Once More

IT'S SAFE TO EAT.
I SPEND EACH DAY TASTING DISHES FOR POISON.
IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE I WAS LAST HERE, BUT LIFE AT THE INNER COURT REMAINS MUCH THE SAME.
WE STILL DON'T YET KNOW IF CONSORT GYOKUYO IS ACTUALLY PREGNANT OR NOT.
WE'VE BEEN SWORN TO SECRECY HERE IN THE JADE PALACE REGARD-LESS...
...AND WE'RE TAKING EVERY PRE-CAUTION JUST IN CASE.
WHEN SHE WAS CARRYING PRINCESS LINGLI, SHE DIDN'T SUFFER FROM SEVERE MORNING SICKNESS...
...SO THERE WAS NO DEFINITIVE PROOF SHE WAS PREGNANT, ASIDE FROM THE FACT THAT SHE HAD MISSED HER COURSES.

WE'LL GET OUT OF OUR RUT YET!
CONSORT GYOKUYO...
...DID SEEM QUITE PROACTIVE ON THAT FRONT.
WE TASKED JINSHI WITH SPEAKING TO THE EMPEROR ABOUT CURBING HIS NIGHTTIME VISITS TO CONSORT GYOKUYO'S BED...
...AS A FURTHER PRECAUTION.
WE WERE PLEASANTLY SURPRISED TO SEE HIS MAJESTY CONTINUE TO VISIT THE JADE PALACE JUST AS OFTEN AS BEFORE.
HE STILL COMES TO PLAY WITH HIS ADORABLE DAUGHTER...
...AND ENJOYS EASY CONVERSATION WITH CONSORT GYOKUYO.
I WAS AFRAID THAT THE DECREASE IN NOCTURNAL VISITS MIGHT GIVE PEOPLE THE WRONG IDEA...
...BUT THAT SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN AN UNFOUNDED WORRY ON MY PART.

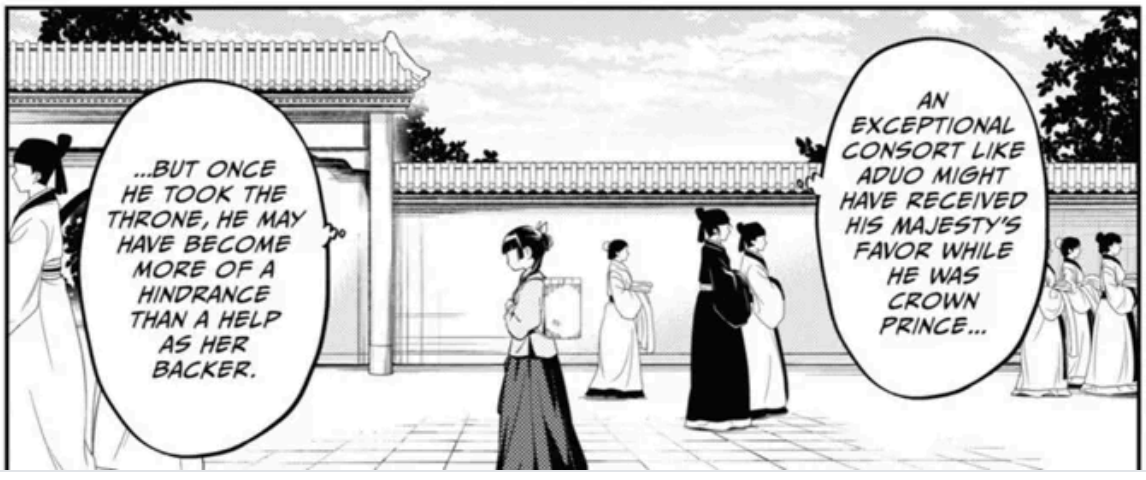
BETWEEN HIS HISTORY WITH CONSORT ADUO AND THIS, IT OCCURS TO ME...
...THAT PERHAPS HE'S NOT JUST A LECHEROUS OLD MAN.

I CAN'T BELIEVE SHE'D HAVE THE AUDACITY TO WEAR THAT!
YEEEAH.
BUT DON'T YOU THINK THAT NOMADIC RIDING HABIT SHE WAS WEARING RECENTLY LOOKED GOOD ON HER?
OH PLEASE! SHE COULDN'T HOLD A CANDLE TO CONSORT ADUO IN ONE OF THOSE!

I SEE GOSSIPING IS STILL EVERYONE'S FAVORITE PASTIME AROUND HERE.
N-NO!
LET ME GUESS, YINGHUA, YOU'RE FIGHTING TEAM ADUO'S SIDE?

A POPULAR TOPIC OF CONVER-SATION IS CONSORT LOULAN...
...THE WHIMSICAL NEWCOMER WHO TOOK CONSORT ADUO'S PLACE.
IT SEEMS SHE COLLECTS CLOTHING FROM ALL CORNERS OF THE WORLD...
...AND CHANGES HER LOOK DAILY.

CONSORT LOULAN HAS YET TO FIND HERSELF IN THAT POSITION HOWEVER.
AND SHE OWES THAT...
...TO HER FATHER, A SENIOR MINISTER WHO HAS HELD THE EMPEROR'S FAVOR SINCE THE REIGN OF HIS PREDECESSOR.
TO THRIVE AT THE INNER COURT, YOU MUST STAND OUT.
BUT THERE ARE THOSE WHO WILL SEEK TO PUT YOU IN YOUR PLACE IF YOU DO.


AN EXCEPTIONAL CONSORT LIKE ADUO MIGHT HAVE RECEIVED HIS MAJESTY'S FAVOR WHILE HE WAS CROWN PRINCE...
...BUT ONCE HE TOOK THE THRONE, HE MAY HAVE BECOME MORE OF A HINDRANCE THAN A HELP AS HER BACKER.

CONSORT ADUO WAS EVENTUALLY DRIVEN OUT OF THE INNER COURT, AFTER ALL.
BUT MAYBE EVEN THAT WAS A LONG TIME COMING WHEN YOU CONSIDER...
...THAT CONSORT LOULAN AND I ARE AROUND THE SAME AGE.
WHILE CONSORT ADUO COULD NEVER BECOME EMPRESS DOWAGER ...
...THE THRONE LOST A TRUSTED ADVISER WITH HER DEPAR-TURE.
AND HER REPLACE-MENT IS BUT A PECULIAR YOUNG WOMAN...
...WHO HOLDS NOT EVEN A SHRED OF SWAY OVER THE IMPERIAL COURT.
JUST BECAUSE HIS MAJESTY CAN'T DISREGARD HER ENTIRELY DOESN'T MEAN HE SHOULD COMPLICATE MATTERS BY GETTING HER WITH CHILD.
IT'S ENOUGH TO MAKE THE HEAD OF THE HIGHEST COURT OFFICIAL HURT.

PHYSICIAN
HELLO! PARDON ME!
OH, HELLO THERE!
I HAVEN'T SEEN YOU IN AGES, MY DEAR.
I'VE COME TO CLEAN OUT THE STORAGE ROOM IN BACK.
WHAT'VE YOU GOT THERE?
HUH ?!
BACK THERE ?!
どすっ
THUD

YOU REALLY DON'T NEED TO GO TO ALL THAT TROUBLE!
WE CAN ASK SOMEONE ELSE TO TAKE CARE OF IT!
EEEP...
THIS QUACK IS A GOOD GUY...
...BUT HE'S UTTERLY USELESS AT HIS JOB.
FWIP
AND WHAT IF WE ASK SOMEONE TO DO THAT AND THEY SWITCH THE MEDICINES AROUND?
JOLT
THE PHYSICIAN WHO KNEW SUIREI, ON THE OTHER HAND...
...WASN'T FIRED BECAUSE HE'D ALWAYS BEEN GREAT AT HIS JOB.
DON'T TELL ME YOU HAVEN'T HEARD ABOUT THE COURT DISPENSARY SCANDAL...
...AND HOW THE PHYSICIAN IN CHARGE RECEIVED A PAY CUT AS PUNISHMENT FOR HIS LAX INVENTORY MANAGEMENT!
STARE

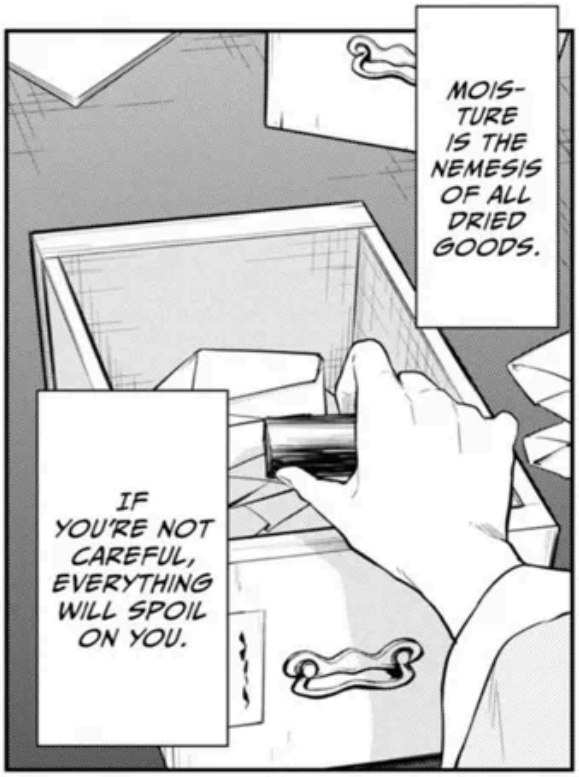
BESIDES, WE NEED TO MAKE IT AS CLEAN AS POSSIBLE IN THERE BEFORE IT GETS TOO HUMID...
...OR ELSE IT'LL BE TOO LATE.
THERE'LL BE ALL KINDS OF HERBS AND MEDICINAL PLANTS THAT NEED PICKING AS THE WEATHER WARMS UP.
...OKAY.
TREMBLE
TREMBLE
HAMSTER...

ぽす PAT
ぽす PAT

WE'LL WRITE THE NAMES OF THE MEDI-CINES ON A WOOD TAG.
ANYTHING THE BUGS HAVE GOTTEN AT OR ANYTHING THAT'S CLEARLY GONE BAD WILL BE TOSSED OUT.
AFTER GIVING THE SHELVES A GOOD DUSTING, WE'LL CHECK THE CONTENTS OF THE DRAWERS AND WIPE THEM DOWN WITH A DRY CLOTH.

AND WE CAN'T FORGET THE CHARCOAL. ADDING SOME INTO THE DRAWERS AT THIS STAGE WILL HELP EXTRACT MOISTURE AND KEEP EVERYTHING INSIDE DRY.
WE'LL PUT ANY REMAINING MEDICINES INTO PAPER PACKETS AND THEN BACK INTO THE DRAWERS.

...I'M GETTING THE QUACK TO PUT EVERY-THING AWAY.
SINCE MY LEG HASN'T HEALED ...
CAN YOU PUT THESE BACK FOR ME TOO PLEASE?
YES, MA'AM!
Y—


MOIS-TURE IS THE NEMESIS OF ALL DRIED GOODS.
IF YOU'RE NOT CAREFUL, EVERYTHING WILL SPOIL ON YOU.

THE EXERCISE OUGHT TO DO HIM GOOD.

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WE CAN FINALLY TAKE A BREAK!
NOT ONLY ARE SWEET POTATOES HARD TO FIND AT THIS TIME OF YEAR...
...BUT HE'S SERVED UP THIS MASH...
...ON VERY FINE PAPER ATOP THE PLATE AS IF IT'S NOTHING.
SWEETS ARE THE BEST WHEN YOU'RE TIRED!
HE MUST BE FROM A WELL-TO-DO FAMILY.
THE PAPER'S QUITE NICE, ISN'T IT?
WE'RE EVEN PURVEYORS TO THE IMPERIAL COURT!
MY, HOW IMPRES-SIVE.
MY FAMILY, LIKE THE REST OF OUR VILLAGE, ARE PAPERMAKERS!

AT ONE TIME, THE COUNTRY HAD EVEN PRODUCED PAPER FOR EXPORT...
...BUT WHEN THE FORMER EMPRESS DOWAGER, MOTHER OF THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR...
...OUTLAWED THE FELLING OF THE TREES USED TO PRODUCE THE BEST PAPER...
...THERE WAS A SIGNIFICANT DECREASE IN QUALITY.
THOUGH THE RESTRICTIONS HAVE SINCE EASED SOMEWHAT, RAW MATERIAL CONTINUES TO BE HARD TO COME BY, AND THE TECHNOLOGY FOR MAKING PAPER HASN'T DEVELOPED.
THE PAPER YOU CAN BUY THESE DAYS IS MADE WITH GRASSES OR OLD RAGS.
BUT THE PRODUCT THEY YIELD IS ALWAYS EXPENSIVE AND THE QUALITY SO SUBPAR THAT BUYING AND USING PAPER HASN'T REALLY CAUGHT ON.
AT PA'S APOTHECARY...
...WE'D PICK THE BEST SHEETS OUT OF A QUESTIONABLE BUNCH...
...TO USE AS DISPOSABLE PACKETS FOR MEDICINE.
IN THE OLD DAYS...
...THE MORE PAPER YOU MADE, THE MORE MONEY YOU EARNED.
HOW I'D LOVE TO HAVE NICER PAPER LIKE THIS TO USE FOR THAT PURPOSE.
IT WOULD PREVENT SPILLS AND KEEP MOISTURE OUT TOO.
I WONDER IF I CAN GET THE QUACK TO SELL ME PAPER WITH A "FRIENDS AND FAMILY" DISCOUNT.
じっ STARE

I GOT TO EAT ALL THE SWEETS I WANTED AS A BOY!
OUR EXPORTS INCREASED STEADILY BECAUSE PAPER BROUGHT A HIGHER PRICE ABROAD.
WE RAN OUT OF MONEY, SO MY OLDER SISTER WAS SENT TO THE INNER COURT.
NOT LONG AFTER, MY LITTLE SISTER FOLLOWED HER...
...AND THEN I ENDED UP HERE TOO.
BUT ONCE CUTTING DOWN TREES BECAME A NO-NO, THINGS WENT DOWNHILL FOR US.
WHEN WE BEGAN MAKING PAPER WITH DIFFERENT MATERIALS, TRADE SUFFERED...
...AND THE VILLAGERS BLAMED MY GRAND-FATHER AND MY FAMILY FOR IT.
HMM.
HE'S HAD A TOUGHER TIME OF IT THAN I GUESSED.
...BUT IT SEEMS LIKE THE VILLAGE IS GETTING BY THESE DAYS, SO I'M GLAD FOR THAT.
I NEVER SAW MY OLDER SISTER AGAIN...
THE GOING PRICE FOR THE RARE MAN WILLING TO BECOME A EUNUCH IS A GOOD ONE, YOU KNOW!

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A FEW DAYS LATER
HELLO.
I'M HERE TO PICK UP WHERE WE LEFT OFF.
DEPRESSED
HAVING IMPERIAL PURVEYOR STATUS CONFERRED UPON YOUR BUSINESS...
...CAN GREATLY IMPACT PROFITS.
ACCORDING TO THE LETTER I JUST RECEIVED FROM MY YOUNGER SISTER...
IS SOMETHING THE MATTER?
...WE MAY HAVE LOST OUR PURVEYOR STATUS.
ROUGH
...THIS PAPER...
...IS CERTAINLY NOT UP TO THE STANDARDS OF THE IMPERIAL COURT, THOUGH.

WHAT ARE THEY TO DO?
THEY WERE SO LOOKING FORWARD TO MAKING LOTS OF PAPER...
...NOW THAT THEY'VE BOUGHT COWS.
COWS ...?
YES.
TO HANDLE THE MANUAL LABOR THAT THEY'D HIRED PEOPLE FOR BEFORE.
NEITHER THE MATERIALS NOR THE PROCESS HAVE CHANGED IN ANY WAY. BUT SOMETHING'S DIFFERENT ABOUT THE PAPER NOW THAT THE COWS ARE INVOLVED.
WITH HIM IN THIS STATE, THE CLEANING WILL HAVE TO WAIT.
DEPRESSED
HE SAYS THE QUALITY'S DROPPED ...
...BUT UNLIKE PAPER OF DUBIOUS QUALITY THAT YOU MIGHT FIND MAKING THE ROUNDS OUT IN THE MARKET...
KUB
...THIS CONTAINS NO IMPURITIES, THE FIBERS IN IT WERE ALL CRUSHED EVENLY, AND THE THICKNESS IS UNIFORM.
RUB
NO CORNERS SEEM TO HAVE BEEN CUT IN ITS MAKING.

IS THERE ANYTHING UNIQUE ABOUT YOUR FAMILY'S METHOD FOR MAKING PAPER?
NO, WE DO IT THE SAME AS EVERYONE ELSE.
HOWEVER, WE'RE PARTICULAR ABOUT THE MAKING OF OUR GLUE.
OH, BUT I CAN'T GO INTO TOO MUCH DETAIL ABOUT THAT.
THE ISSUE ...
...IS THIS PILLING ON THE SURFACE...
OOPS.
ポロ... CRUMBLE
...AND ITS POOR DURABILITY, WHICH MEANS IT TEARS EASILY WHEN PULLED.
SO THEY'VE JUST STARTED KEEPING COWS...
...AND THEY HAVE RESERVOIRS OF STANDING SPRING WATER TO USE FOR THE GLUE.
DO YOU PERHAPS USE A SPECIAL KIND OF WATER OR SOMETHING?
YOU COULD SAY THAT.
TO ALLOW FOR THE GLUE TO SET JUST RIGHT, WE DRAW SPRING WATER...
...AND STORE IT IN RESERVOIRS SO WE CAN CONTROL HUMIDITY.

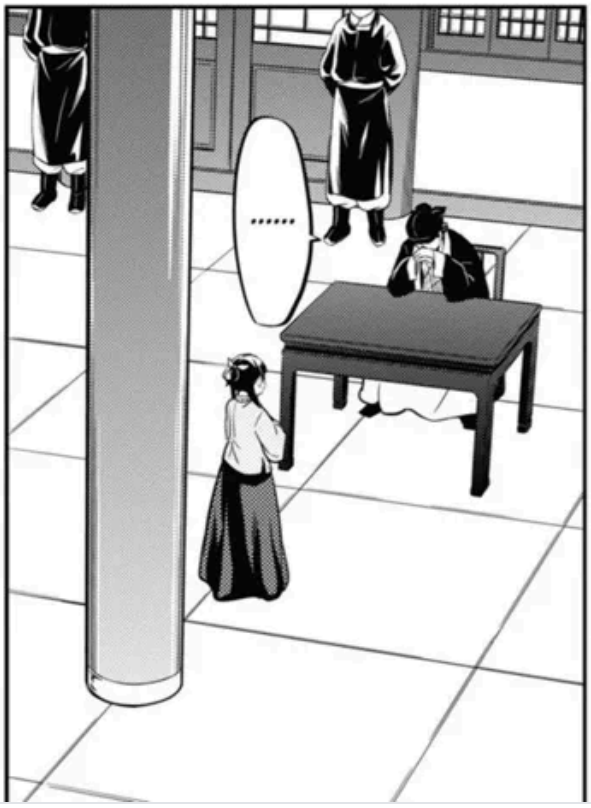
WE USE DISSOLVED WHEAT FLOUR LIKE YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO!
NEVER!
CLATTER
ゴソ
CLATTER
DO YOU BOIL THE WATER LEFT OVER FROM WASHING RICE FOR THE GLUE OR USE SOMETHING ELSE?
WHERE ARE THE COWS KEPT?
OH, HERE IT IS.
GASP
IT WON'T HARDEN RIGHT OTHER-W—
WELL ...
...IT DOESN'T MATTER ONE WAY OR THE OTHER.
HERE YOU GO.
OH, ARROW-ROOT TEA?
GLUB GLUB GLUB
とぽぽ
I CAN'T TELL YOU THAT MUCH.

?
I THINK YOU WENT WRONG WITH THE RECIPE SOME-WHERE, DEAR.
THERE'LL BE NO DRINKING THIS IF IT REFUSES TO LEAVE THE CUP.
SORRY ABOUT THAT.
I'LL SHOW YOU HOW YOU CAN MAKE IT EASIER TO INGEST.
JUST FOLLOW MY LEAD, IF YOU WOULD.
SWIRL
SWIRL
LICK THE SPOON LIKE SO, THEN USE IT TO MIX THE CONTENTS OF YOUR CUP. DO THIS SEVERAL TIMES.
THIS FEELS LIKE BAD MANNERS.
SWIRL
SWIRL
SWIRL

ARROW-ROOT TEA AND GLUE ARE QUITE SIMILAR, WOULDN'T YOU SAY?
WHAT DID I TELL YOU?
IT'S NOT AS THICK ANYMORE.
OH?
COWS ...
...MUST PRODUCE A LOT OF SALIVA.
.....
I WONDER IF GLUE WOULD BECOME MORE WATERY IF YOU DID THIS TO IT TOO.
HMM ...?
SWISH さら
SWISH さら
OF COURSE THE QUACK IS SLOW TO CATCH ON.
PERHAPS IT MIGHT BE A GOOD IDEA TO ASK YOUR FAMILY...
...WHERE THEIR COWS ARE DRINKING FROM, JUST IN CASE?
.....!

I'LL LEAVE YOU TO IT, THEN.
...I MUST WRITE TO MY SISTER AT ONCE!
WHAP

YOU'RE MAOMAO OF THE JADE PALACE, YES?


.....

SORRY TO HAVE KEPT YOU WAITING.

TELL ME.
HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO BUY THE FREEDOM OF A COUR-TESAN?
WHAT, NOW?
ER...

BIG DUMB DOG...
AND HERE I THOUGHT THIS WAS ABOUT SUIREI...
...GIVEN HE SENT SOMEONE TO FETCH ME...
WELL, THE PRICE DEPENDS ON THE WOMAN...
...AND ON HER CURRENT REPUTATION.
I HEARD TALK OF SOMEONE BUYING OUT THE CONTRACT OF ONE OF THE THREE PRINCESSES AT VERDIGRIS THE OTHER DAY!
JUST HEAR ME OUT, OKAY?!
BAM
BAM
HE MUST BE WORRIED ABOUT PAI LING.
TO PUT IT PLAINLY, I JUST WANT TO KNOW WHAT A TOP-TIER WOMAN'LL COST ME.
THAT'S NOT SO EASY TO ANSWER ...
NOT INCLUDING THE COSTS FOR THE CELEBRATION...
...WE'RE PROBABLY TALKING A BASE PRICE OF 200 SILVER.
DOUBLE THAT TO SECURE THE CONTRACT OF A CHEAP GIRL.
200 SILVER IS ROUGHLY THE AMOUNT A FARMER WOULD EARN IN A YEAR.
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THIS IS BECAUSE THE PLEASURE DISTRICT HAS A CUSTOM OF SEEING OFF ITS COURTESANS WITH GRAND CELEBRATIONS.
THE COST OF BUYING OUT A COURTESAN'S CONTRACT IS CALCULATED BY ADDING UP HER POTENTIAL EARNINGS OVER THE REMAINING YEARS ON HER CONTRACT AND THEN SOME...
...THEN DOUBLING THAT.
TRUTH BE TOLD, HER CONTRACT WOULD'VE RUN OUT LONG AGO.
BUYING OUT A CONTRACT IS THE EQUIVALENT OF PAYING OFF A COURTESAN'S DEBTS, BUT IN PAI LING'S CASE, SHE SURELY HAS NONE TO SPEAK OF.
PAI LING HAS BEEN A GOOD EARNER FOR VERDIGRIS EVER SINCE HER DEBUT, WHEN SHE STARTED TAKING PATRONS.
THE FACT THAT SHE CONTINUES TO WORK AT THE BROTHEL DESPITE THIS...
...IS ONLY BECAUSE HER OWN INCLINATIONS ARE WELL-SUITED TO THE JOB.
SHE'S THE QUINTESSENTIAL COURTESAN WHO HAS BEEN WITH THE BROTHEL THROUGH THICK AND THIN.
...BUT SHE'S BEEN WORKING AT VERDIGRIS AS THE ELDEST OF THE THREE PRINCESSES SINCE BEFORE I WAS EVEN BORN.
...BY SUCKING THE VITALITY OUT OF MEN...
AS SOME RUMORS WOULD HAVE IT, PAI LING STAYS YOUNG...

YOU'D EXPECT HER VALUE TO HAVE DROPPED BECAUSE OF HER AGE...
...BUT PAI LING IS AS BEAUTIFUL AS EVER AND HAS REFINED HER SKILLS AS A DANCER OVER THE YEARS.
STILL, THE CRAFTY OLD BIDDY...
...IS PROBABLY SCHEMING TO SELL OFF HER OLDEST PRINCESS WHILE THE BROTHEL IS DOING WELL...
...SO SHE CAN BRING IN SOME FRESH BLOOD JUST OUT OF TRAINING TO REPLACE HER.
THE FIRST IS THE MASTER OF A WORK-SHOP.
HE'S A GENEROUS, GOOD-NATURED OLD MAN WHO ENJOYS PAI LING'S DANCING OVER HER OTHER OFFERINGS.
HE'S ALSO TALKED ABOUT BUYING OUT HER CONTRACT TIME AND TIME AGAIN.
IF PAI LING'S FREEDOM IS ON THE TABLE...
...I CAN THINK OF TWO FAMILIAR FACES WHO MIGHT VIE FOR IT.
THE OTHER IS A HIGH-RANKING GOVERN-MENT OFFICIAL AND REGULAR PATRON OF HERS.
HE'S IN HIS THIRTIES, SO HE'S GOT A LOT OF LIFE LEFT IN HIM.
HE AND PAI LING ALSO SEEM TO BE A PERFECT MATCH WHEN IT COMES TO NIGHTLY EXERTIONS.
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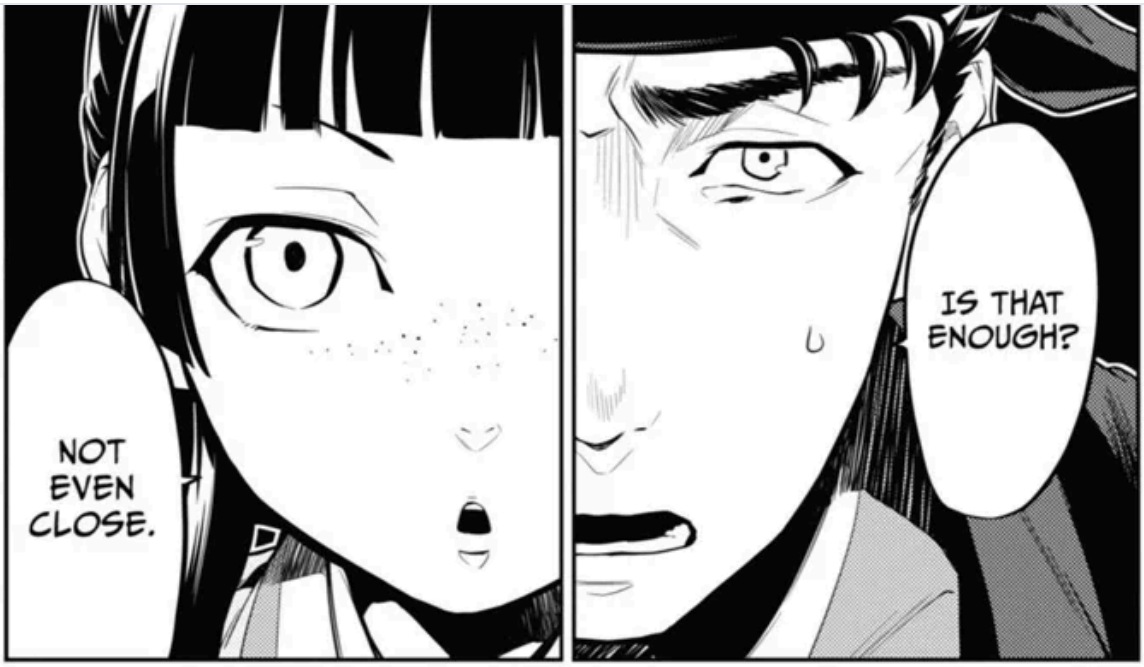
PAI LING IS KNOWN FOR BEING A SUBLIME DANCER...
...BUT SHE'S ALSO FAMOUS FOR BEING SECOND TO NONE IN BED.
IF ANYTHING SHOULD GIVE ME PAUSE...
...IT'S THAT HER PATRONS ALWAYS LOOK WORSE FOR WEAR THE NEXT DAY.
IN OTHER WORDS, SHE'S ONE LUSTY LADY.
SOMETIMES WHEN HER NEEDS AREN'T BEING MET...
...SHE'LL INDISCRIMINATELY GO AFTER THE BROTHEL'S MALE SERVANTS, OTHER COURTESANS, AND EVEN THE GIRLS IN TRAINING.
...THIS OPTION MIGHT ACTUALLY BE THE MOST HARMONIOUS FOR ALL INVOLVED.
SINCE PAI LING ISN'T THE KIND OF WOMAN WHO WOULD LEAVE THE BROTHEL OF HER OWN ACCORD...
OFFICIALLY, PAI LING WOULD RETIRE AND ONLY ENTERTAIN PATRONS ON SPECIAL OCCASIONS.
THAT WOULD LEAVE HER FREE TO PURSUE WHOMEVER HER HEART DESIRED.
THAT BRINGS US TO ANOTHER OPTION.
THE OLD MADAM IS PROBABLY ALSO THINKING ABOUT LETTING PAI LING TAKE OVER VERDIGRIS.

...AND THE CURRENT THREE PRIN-CESSES— PAI LING, MEIMEI, AND JOKA— TOOK CARE OF ME.
UNTIL PA ADOPTED ME, I WAS A WARD OF VERDIGRIS, WHERE THE OLD MADAM...
BUT... ...I THINK THAT WOULD BE UNFORTU-NATE.
SHE FED ME FROM HER OWN BOSOM WHEN I WAS A BABE.
SHE HAD NEVER GIVEN BIRTH BEFORE, BUT HER UNIQUE CONSTI-TUTION ENABLED HER TO PRODUCE BREAST MILK.
IT WAS PAI LING WHO LOOKED AFTER ME THE MOST, THOUGH SHE HAD ONLY JUST MADE HER DEBUT AS A FULL-FLEDGED COURTESAN.
I CALL PAI LING MY SISTER, BUT SHE'S MORE LIKE A MOTHER TO ME.

I DON'T KNOW HOW PAI LING FEELS ABOUT IT, THOUGH.
SOME EVEN LOSE THE ABILITY TO DO SO FROM THE CONSTANT USE IN THE PROFESSION OF CONTRACEPTIVE AND ABORTIFACIENT DRUGS.
MANY FORMER COURTESANS GIVE UP ON HAVING CHILDREN.
...AND DESPITE KNOWING THAT PAI LING SERVICES PATRONS BESIDES HIM...
...HE'S FALLEN FOR HER ANYWAY.
LI HAKU IS STILL A YOUNG MAN IN HIS TWENTIES ...
BUT WHAT I DO KNOW...
...IS THAT HER MATERNAL INSTINCTS ARE AS STRONG...
...AS HER SEXUAL APPETITES.
HE MIGHT LOOK LIKE A DUMB DOG, BUT HE SEEMS PRETTY SERIOUS, DEEP DOWN.
THE KIND OF ENDEARING IDIOT WHO'D TRY TO GET AHEAD IN LIFE ALL FOR THE SAKE OF THE WOMAN HE LOVES.
ABOVE ALL...

...AND SHOWED NO SIGNS OF BEING WORN OUT AFTER.
...HE WAS HOLED UP WITH PAI LING IN HER ROOM FOR TWO WHOLE DAYS...
THE FIRST TIME HE VISITED VERDI-GRIS...
GLANCE
THAT SAID...
THAT MAKES HIM A GOOD CANDIDATE FOR THE BUYOUT.
HEY, NOW. I'M WORTH MORE THAN THAT, Y'KNOW.
800 SILVER A YEAR, PERHAPS ...?
SIR LI HAKU.
MAY I ASK HOW MUCH MONEY YOU MAKE?
WHY DO YOU ASK THAT OUT OF THE BLUE?
.....
THEN... 1,200 A YEAR?
SO ROUGHLY 1,000 SILVER PIECES A YEAR.


NOT EVEN CLOSE.
IS THAT ENOUGH?

TH...
THAT MUCH ?!
THEY'LL WANT 10,000 SILVER, CASH IN HAND.

...DO YOU THINK I WOULD ACTUALLY BE ABLE TO BUY HER OUT?
SAY I DID MANAGE TO GET MY HANDS ON 10,000 SILVER...
HEY.
SLUMP
カクッ

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WELL, THERE'S NOTHING FOR IT.
ギリ GRIND GRIND ギリ
...ARE YOU ASKING ME IF I THINK SHE WOULD REJECT YOU?
BY THAT ...
STAB
URGH!

!!
COULD I PLEASE ASK YOU TO DISROBE, SIR?

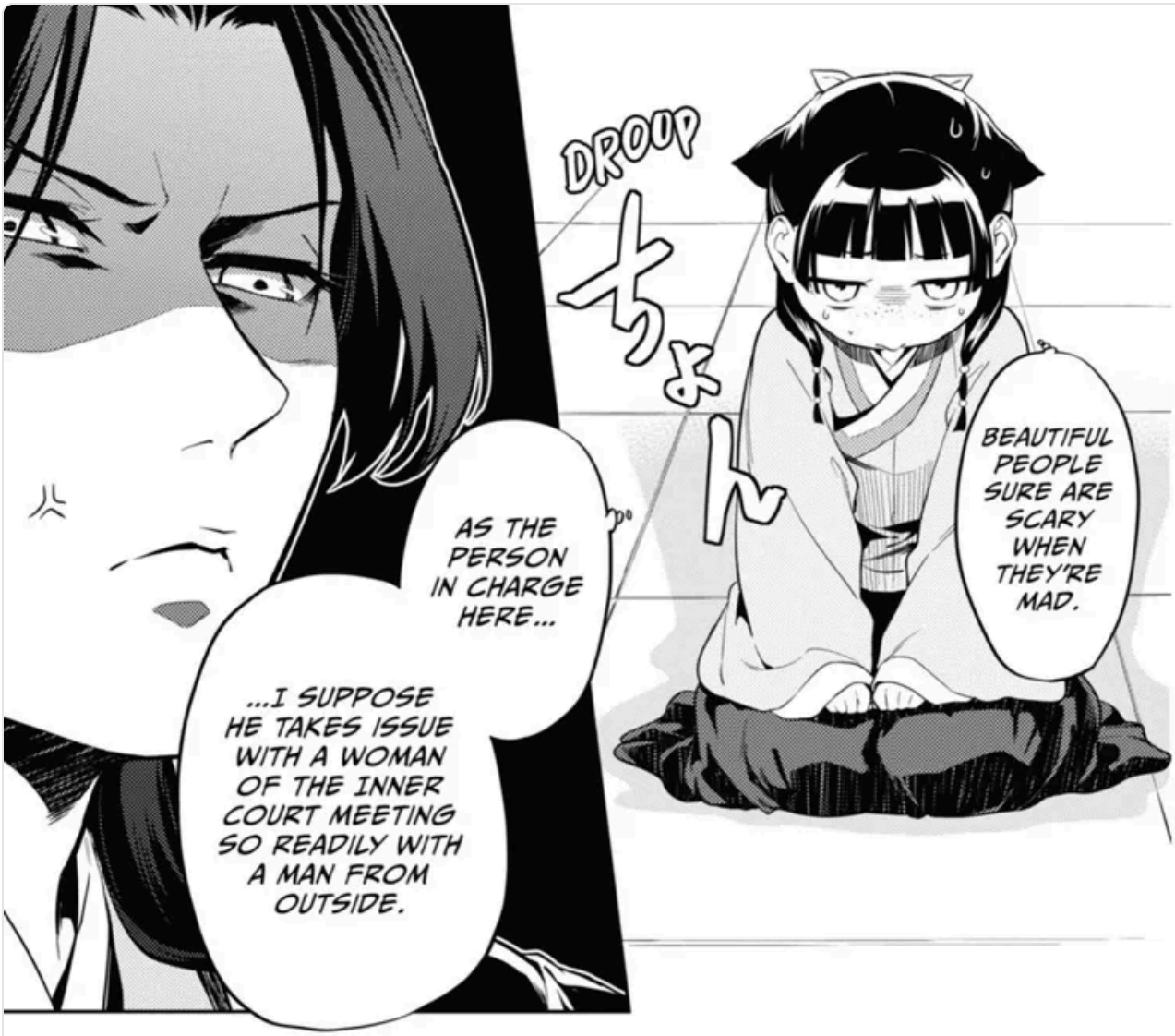
I MERELY WISH TO APPRAISE YOU.
I MEAN NOTHING UNTOWARD BY IT.

SHE WON'T REJECT ME IF I DO, WILL SHE?
ALL I CAN TELL YOU IS WHETHER OR NOT YOU'RE TO HER TASTES.
...FINE, I'LL DO IT.
DON'T FORGET YOUR TROUSERS AS WELL.
THOSE TOO...?
ONCE YOU'VE FINISHED, PLEASE RAISE YOUR ARMS SO THAT YOUR HANDS ARE AT SHOULDER-LEVEL...
...THEN BALL UP YOUR FISTS.
RUSTLE RUSTLE
...LIKE THIS?
THE INSATIABLE PAI LING ISN'T PICKY ABOUT HER PARTNERS ...
...BUT SHE STILL HAS A TYPE.
HMM...
...NOT BAD...

HIS PHYSIQUE IS NICELY BALANCED TOO.
HIS SKIN IS A HEALTHY COLOR.
HIS ARMS RADIATE POWER.
A TIGHT WAIST.
JUDGING BY THE SUBTLY THICKER GIRTH OF HIS RIGHT ARM, HE MUST BE RIGHT-HANDED.
EVEN HIS LEGS AND LOINS ARE WELL-MUSCLED.
THOSE MUSCLES ARE WHAT YOU'D EXPECT OF A MILITARY MAN.
HIS DAILY TRAINING REGIMEN MUST BE AS WELL-BALANCED AS HIS BODY.
I THINK HE MIGHT ACTUALLY STAND A CHANCE.
CLACK
RIGHT! LAST BUT CERTAINLY NOT LEAST, THAT HAS TO COME OFF!

WHAT EXACTLY ARE YOU ALL DOING IN HERE, PRAY TELL?

GOOD DAY TO YOU, SIR JINSHI.
G...
MOPE
MOPE
WELL ...?
WHAT WAS ALL THAT ABOUT?


DROOP
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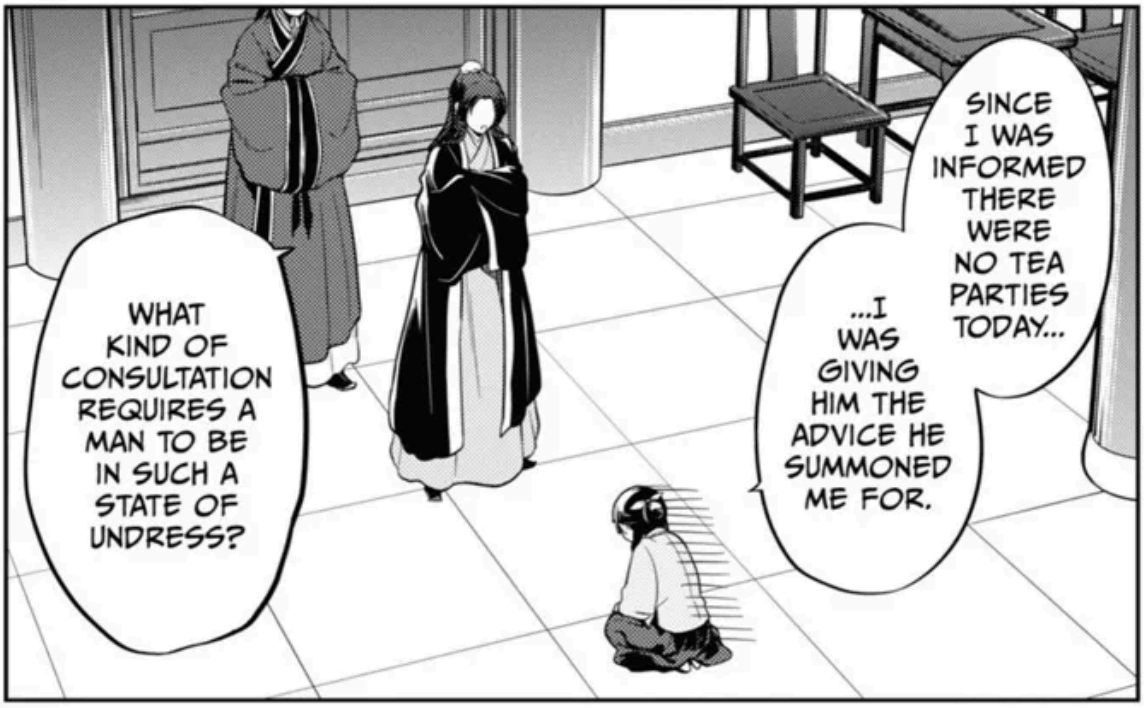
BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE SURE ARE SCARY WHEN THEY'RE MAD.
AS THE PERSON IN CHARGE HERE...
...I SUPPOSE HE TAKES ISSUE WITH A WOMAN OF THE INNER COURT MEETING SO READILY WITH A MAN FROM OUTSIDE.


SINCE I WAS INFORMED THERE WERE NO TEA PARTIES TODAY...
...I WAS GIVING HIM THE ADVICE HE SUMMONED ME FOR.
WHAT KIND OF CONSULTATION REQUIRES A MAN TO BE IN SUCH A STATE OF UNDRESS?

I DIDN'T LAY A FINGER ON HIM. ALL I DID WAS TAKE A GOOD LOOK.
IT WAS NOTHING SORDID, I SWEAR.
AND WHY DID YOU NEED TO DO THAT?
...JUST A GOOD LOOK, SHE SAYS...
WELL, WHAT BETTER WAY IS THERE TO KNOW IF A PERSON SUITS YOUR TASTES THAN TO SEE THEM UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL?
"WHY?", YOU ASK?

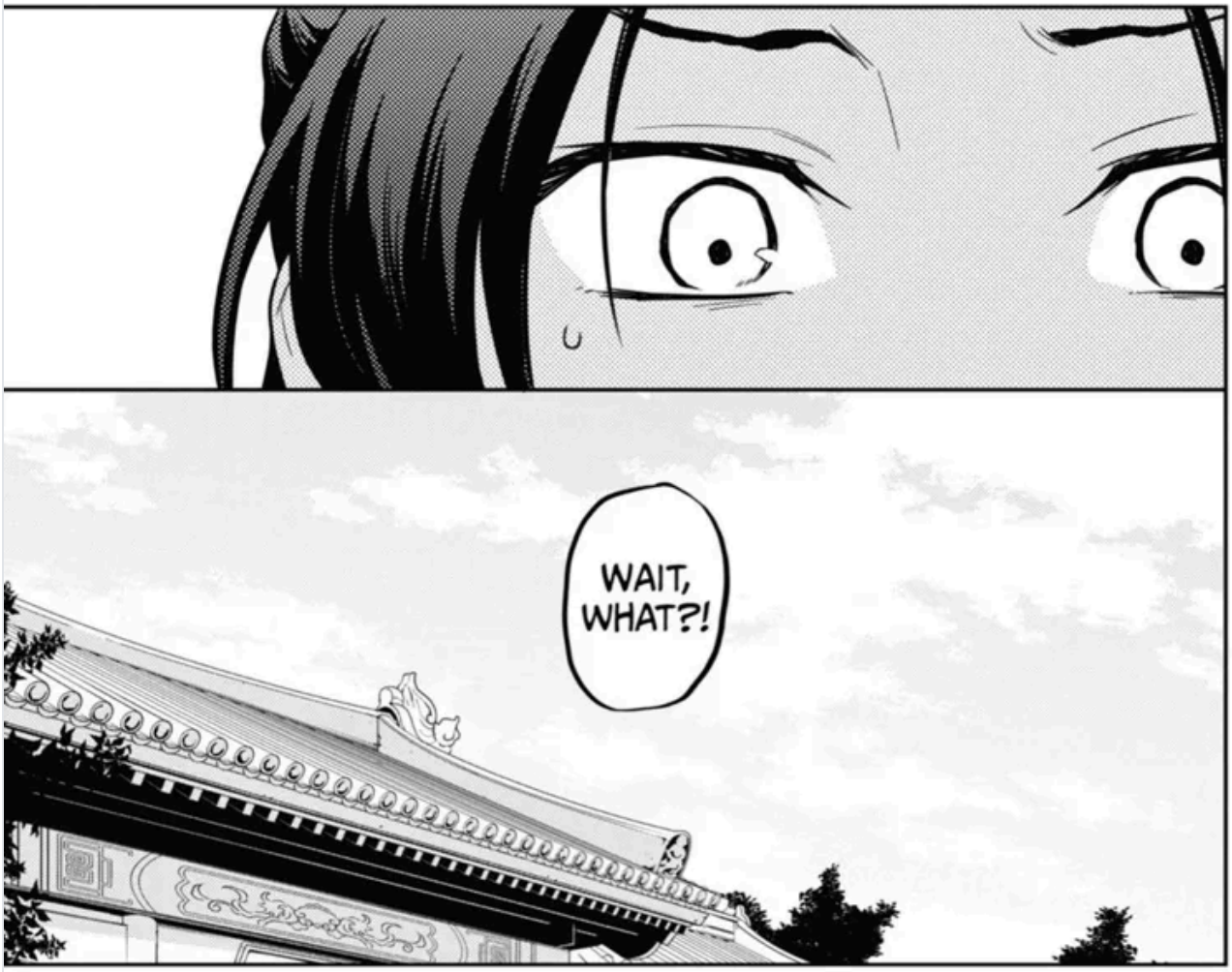
FINDING THAT PERSON WHO FITS YOUR IDEAL IS THE GREATEST FEELING, SURELY!

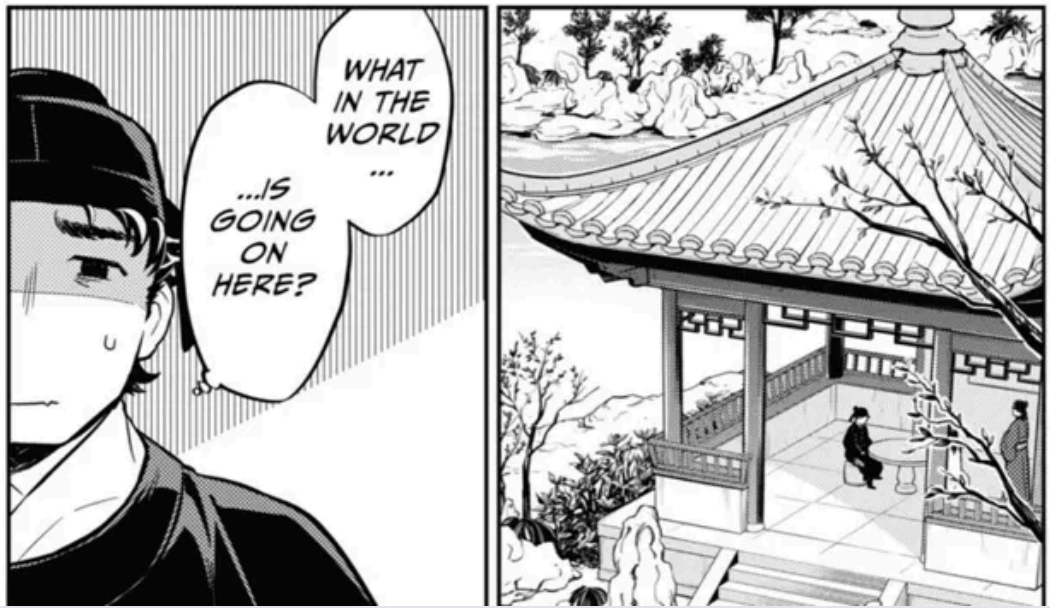
I MAY HAVE GIVEN IT A LOT OF THOUGHT, BUT WHAT MATTERS MOST HERE IS PAI LING'S FEELINGS.
SHE'S HAD MANY LOVERS IN HER LIFE...
...SO IT WOULD BE BEST IF SHE WENT TO A MAN SHE LOVED MORE THAN THE REST.
LI HAKU'S BODY JUST ABOUT GETS PASSING MARKS FROM ME.
I WAS HOPING TO ASSESS HIS LAST, MOST IMPORTANT ASSET...
...THEN THINK ON HOW HE MIGHT PLEAD HIS CASE TO PAI LING, BUT...
SO...
...HOW WOULD YOU RATE THAT FELLOW'S APPEAR-ANCE?
HE HAS A VERY LEAN AND NICELY PROPOR-TIONED BODY.
HE SEEMS TO BE DILIGENT WITH HIS DAILY TRAINING...
...AND HE'S PROBABLY ONE OF THE MOST COMPETENT SOLDIERS AMONG HIS PEERS.

YOU CAN TAKE THE MEASURE OF A MAN FROM HIS BODY?
TIGHT-LIPPED CUSTOMERS ARE QUITE COMMON AT AN APOTH-ECARY...
...SO YOU GET INTO THE PRACTICE OF IDENTIFYING PEOPLE'S DAILY HABITS FROM THEIR BODIES.
CAN YOU TELL WHAT KIND OF PERSON I AM BY LOOKING AT MY BODY IN THE SAME WAY?
THIS GUY...
IS HE REALLY ENVIOUS OF LI HAKU?
WELL ...?
HUH?

I CAN'T BELIEVE HE WANTS TO FLAUNT HIS BODY SO EVERYONE KNOWS HOW MUCH MORE BEAUTIFUL HE IS THAN LI HAKU.
WHAT A PIECE OF WORK.
DO WHAT YOU WANT. I DON'T CARE.
I DON'T NEED TO EXAMINE YOU...
...TO KNOW YOU'VE GOT A NICE BODY.
IN FACT, I GOT AN EYEFUL OF JINSHI BEFORE.
I KNOW HE'S SURPRISINGLY FIT.
BUT...

I'M AFRAID THERE'S NO POINT IN ME GIVING YOU A ONCE-OVER.
PALE
UNFOR-TUNATELY, SIR JINSHI...
...YOU WOULDN'T BE A GOOD MATCH FOR MY BIG SISTER.


WAIT, WHAT?!


WHAT IN THE WORLD ...
...IS GOING ON HERE?

WHAT IS THIS?!
MY APOLOGIES FOR THE HASTY SUMMONS.
UH, OKAY...
IF I REMEMBER RIGHT, THIS GUY'S NAME IS JINSHI.
HE'S THE BEAUTIFUL EUNUCH RUMORED TO BE THE EMPEROR'S LOVER.
HE MAY BE YOUNGER THAN ME, BUT HE'S SERIOUS ABOUT HIS JOB AND SHREWD, TO BOOT.
THE RANK INDICATED BY THE COLOR OF THAT ORNAMENT AT HIS WAIST...
...IS NOT ONE I'LL BE LIKELY TO OBTAIN ANYTIME SOON.

THIS IS MY FIRST TIME SEEING HIM UP CLOSE LIKE THIS...
...BUT I FEEL AS IF I'VE SEEN HIM SOMEWHERE BEFORE.
THAT ATTENDANT STANDING A LITTLE WAYS BEHIND HIM...
...HAD ME ACT AS HIS GO-BETWEEN WITH VERDIGRIS NOT TOO LONG AGO.
I MUST THANK YOU FOR GIVING MY MAID MUCH TO THINK ABOUT THE OTHER DAY.
...UH, MY PLEA-SURE ...?
THE GIRL WITH THE FRECK-LES...
...DID MENTION SHE WAS WORKING AS A PERSONAL MAID IN THE OUTER COURT.
NEVER IMAGINED SHE WAS WORKING FOR HIM, THOUGH.
I'M TOLD...
...THERE IS A CERTAIN WOMAN IN YOUR HEART RIGHT NOW.

GASP
IS THAT WHY HE'S GOT SUCH A SMUG LOOK ON HIS FACE?
DON'T TELL ME...
...SHE LET SLIP TO THIS EUNUCH ABOUT ME WANTING TO BUY A COURTESAN'S FREEDOM...
HER BEDROOM EYES AND SEDUCTIVE SMILE, HER FINGERTIPS LIFTING UP THE HEMS OF HER ROBES, HER BEAUTIFUL FORM IN THE MIDDLE OF A DANCE...
PAI LING IS A FINE WOMAN, INDEED.
HER THOUGHTFULNESS AND THE WAY SHE PICKS UP ON THE LITTLEST THINGS...
YOU MIGHT SAY IT GOES HAND IN HAND WITH HER JOB...
CLENCH
BUT...
...IF HE TURNS HIS MOCKERY ON PAI LING, I'LL WIPE THAT LOOK RIGHT OFF HIS FACE.
WELL, WHEN YOU'RE AS BEAUTIFUL, YOUNG, AND POWERFUL AS HE IS...
...I SUPPOSE BUYING OUT A COURTESAN'S CONTRACT WOULD BE CAUSE FOR AMUSEMENT.
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IF HE INTENDS TO INSULT PAI LING IN SOME WAY, I—
GLARE
AND I BELIEVE SHE'S BEING GENUINE TOWARD ME.
...BUT AS LONG AS I BELIEVE HER TO BE TRUE...
...WHAT ANYONE ELSE SAYS DOESN'T MATTER.
WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF I TOLD YOU THAT I WOULD SHOULDER THE COST OF HER FREEDOM FOR YOU?
BAM

...20,000 SILVER...
WOULD 20,000 COVER IT?
JUST WHAT I SAID.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?
...YOU WOULD CONSIDER EVEN SAYING SUCH A THING TO A SOLDIER LIKE ME WHO IS ALL BUT UNKNOWN TO YOU.
...BUT I HAVE TO WONDER WHY...
OF COURSE I VERY MUCH APPRECIATE THE OFFER...

THERE MUST BE SOME KIND OF CATCH. IT'S TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE.
EVEN A CHILD COULD SEE THAT.
MY HOUSE CAT IS, BY NATURE, RATHER WARY.
HOUSE CAT? DOES HE MEAN THE LI'L LADY?
YET SHE GIVES YOU ADVICE...
...AND IS EVEN THINKING OF PUTTING YOU FORWARD TO BE THE LIFE PARTNER OF SOMEONE SHE CONSIDERS HER OLDER SISTER.
DOES THAT MEAN ...
...THAT IN SPITE OF HER ATTITUDE, SHE TRUSTS ME IN HER OWN WAY?
SO YOU'RE SAYING THAT IF YOUR CAUTIOUS CAT GROWS FOND OF SOMEONE...
...YOU FEEL YOU CAN TRUST THEM YOURSELF?
TWITCH
FOND OF YOU, IS SHE?
MAYBE I SHOULDN'T HAVE SAID THAT!

I'VE ASKED AROUND ABOUT YOU.
YOU MAY BE THE SON OF A LOCAL OFFICIAL ...
...BUT GIVEN THE MILITARY FACTIONS HERE IN THE CAPITAL, IT CAN'T HAVE BEEN EASY FOR YOU TO BECOME AN OFFICER.
YOU HAD THE GOOD FORTUNE TO BE PICKED OUT OF THE RANK AND FILE BY A CANNY TACTICIAN...
...AND WERE ASSIGNED YOUR OWN UNIT.
NEVER-THELESS, 20,000 SILVER IS FAR TOO LAVISH A SUM.
IS MY DESIRE TO BE ON GOOD TERMS WITH SOMEONE WHO SHOWS SUCH POTENTIAL...
...TRULY SO SHOCKING?
WHAT I NEED IS HALF OF THAT.
NO, WAIT.
IF I TAKE MY CONNECTIONS AND SAVINGS INTO ACCOUNT...
...I ONLY NEED A QUARTER OF THAT AMOUNT.

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GULP
I'M HONORED THAT YOU THINK SO HIGHLY OF ME THAT YOU WOULD MAKE SUCH AN OFFER.
AND TO BE PERFECTLY HONEST, I'M DESPERATE TO ACCEPT IT.
BUT...
...I'M AFRAID I CAN'T TAKE YOUR SILVER.

SHE MAY BE JUST ANOTHER COURTESAN TO YOU...
...BUT SHE'S THE ONLY WOMAN FOR ME.

IF I DON'T USE MY OWN HARD-EARNED MONEY TO FREE THE WOMAN I WISH TO MAKE MY WIFE...
...WHAT KIND OF MAN WOULD I BE?!
VERY WELL, THEN.
FORGIVE ME FOR WASTING YOUR TIME.

YES, SIR.
I MAY WISH TO SPEAK WITH YOU AGAIN, IF THAT SUITS.
WHAT IN THE WORLD WAS THAT ABOUT ...?

MAO-MAO!
YOU'VE GOT A LETTER!
OH, THANK YOU.
PAI LING'S REPLY...
SURE, GRANNY MIGHT'VE MENTIONED SOMETHING IN PASSING...
BESIDES...
...BUT I'M BRINGING IN THE MONEY AS EVER, SO I'M NOT GOING ANYWHERE!
...I'M STILL WAITING FOR A PRINCE TO COME AND SWEEP ME OFF MY FEET!

...BUT SHE REFUSES TO GIVE UP ON HER DREAM.
MAYBE THAT RESOLVE IS THE SECRET TO HER YOUTH-FULNESS.
...AND HAS BEEN INVOLVED WITH MORE MEN THAN I HAVE FINGERS TO COUNT...
PAI LING'S NOT EXACTLY YOUNG ANY-MORE...
I CAN'T ARGUE WITH THAT.
HEH!
WE'VE HEARD ABOUT THE "PRINCES" THEY HAVE ABROAD...
...WHO RIDE IN ON WHITE HORSES TO RESCUE TRAPPED YOUNG WOMEN.
ALL HE WOULD HAVE TO DO IS PLAY THE PART OF HER PRINCE...
SO LONG AS PAI LING IS FOND OF HIM...
...THE MAN TO BUY HER FREEDOM WOULDN'T EVEN NEED 10,000 SILVER.
...A ROLE THAT REQUIRES EXCEPTIONAL STAMINA, RIPPLING MUSCLES...
...AND SOME-THING MOST AVERAGE MEN HAVE BUT EUNUCHS DON'T.

SO ALL THAT WOULD BE NECESSARY IS A LITTLE MONEY FOR THE PARTY.
...I DOUBT EVEN THE OLD HAG WOULD TRY TO SQUEEZE HIM DRY.
IF SIS WERE REALLY SERIOUS ABOUT SOMEONE...
A DISPLAY OF THE PRIDE THAT COMES WITH BEING A COURTESAN.
EVEN GRANNY, EVER THE PENNY-PINCHER, IS ALWAYS SAYING THAT IT'LL BE THE BIGGEST AND BRIGHTEST CELEBRATION AROUND.
...PAI LING WOULD WANT HER EXIT FROM THIS STAGE TO BE JUST AS FABULOUS AS HER ENTRANCE.
AS ONE OF THE MOST BRILLIANT BLOOMS TO HAVE BLOS-SOMED IN THIS GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS...
...DOESN'T DESERVE PAI LING.
A MAN WHO CAN'T EARN THAT MUCH...
THE MONEY FOR THE CELEBRA-TION WOULD PROBABLY BE ABOUT 5,000 SILVER.
SMILE
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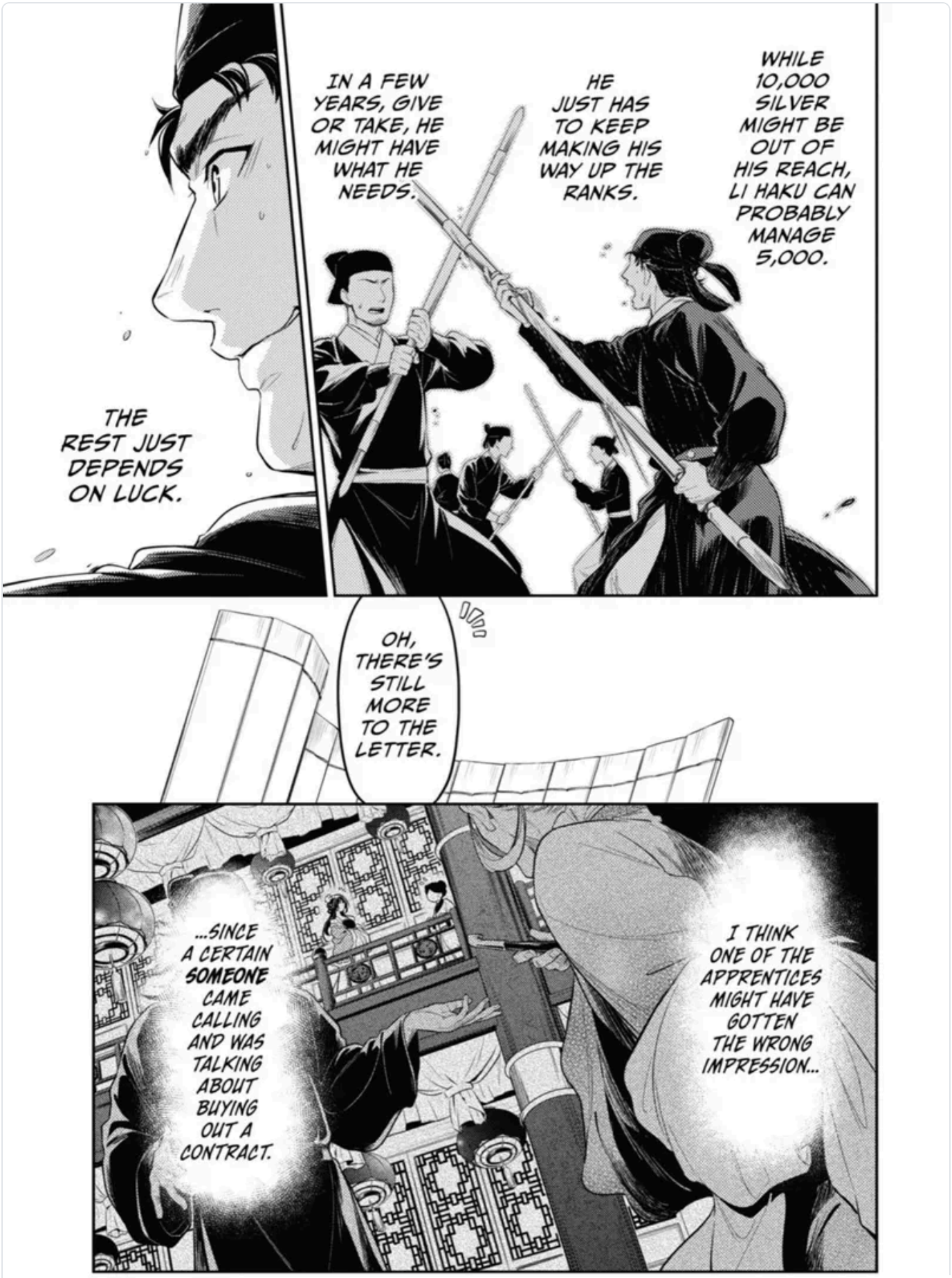
THE REST JUST DEPENDS ON LUCK.
IN A FEW YEARS, GIVE OR TAKE, HE MIGHT HAVE WHAT HE NEEDS.
HE JUST HAS TO KEEP MAKING HIS WAY UP THE RANKS.
WHILE 10,000 SILVER MIGHT BE OUT OF HIS REACH, LI HAKU CAN PROBABLY MANAGE 5,000.
OH, THERE'S STILL MORE TO THE LETTER.
...SINCE A CERTAIN SOMEONE CAME CALLING AND WAS TALKING ABOUT BUYING OUT A CONTRACT.
I THINK ONE OF THE APPRENTICES MIGHT HAVE GOTTEN THE WRONG IMPRESSION...

"A CERTAIN SOMEONE," HMM...?
PAI LING'S NOT USUALLY SHY ABOUT INCLUDING NAMES. IF SHE'S BEING VAGUE LIKE THIS...
...IT CAN ONLY MEAN HIM.
CLUTCH
WELL, NOW WHAT?